

A Message From Delaware's New Education Secretary

Delaware's new Secretary of Education Mark Holodick speaks earlier this month at the New Castle County Combined School Boards meeting ([watch online](#)).

Editor's Note: The following piece is written by Delaware Secretary of Education Mark Holodick, who was [recently confirmed as secretary by the Delaware Senate](#). This article originally appeared in the Delaware Department of Education's January Take Note E-Newsletter. For more information on the great things happening in schools across Delaware, sign up to receive Take Note: Education in the First State at <http://www.doe.k12.de.us/takenote>.

Over the past three months, as I awaited the Senate confirmation hearing to become Secretary of Education, I've had the opportunity to meet with and hear from many Delawareans and stakeholders. Through my position at the University of Delaware as a senior leadership specialist, as a friend of many teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators, and as the father of three public school daughters, I've listened to educators, families, DSEA leadership, elected officials, business leaders, and students. I've learned a lot. I recognize quite clearly that perspectives around many issues vary.

One goal that everyone agreed on and unequivocally supported was the need to improve opportunities and outcomes for ALL children. On this, I dug deep and pushed hard. I asked the question: Are all of our children being afforded opportunities to experience a first-class education? The answer was consistent in every conversation. Even when people were satisfied, even more than satisfied, regarding their own child, they acknowledged it wasn't the case for all. I agreed,

and the data we've collected over many years confirms this is so.

In most of those conversations, I was asked what I planned on doing about it and what things I saw as priorities if confirmed. Until recently, I was still determining my answer. I now have a response that has been informed by the feedback I received.

First and foremost, it's critically important that we continue to address the many challenges the current pandemic poses to the operations of our schools. The health, safety, and well-being of our students are paramount, and the best way to make sensible decisions around everything having to do with COVID-19 starts with being well-informed. I will collaborate with and listen to others such as the Governor and his team members, Division of Public Health officials, superintendents, charter school heads, Department of Education colleagues, Delaware State Education Association leaders, school board members, educators, and student leadership organization representatives to gather as much data and information as possible so that we, as a department, can effectively support schools. Being well-informed allows us to make thoughtful decisions in the best interest of all. While those decisions may not always be popular, they will be transparent, and the communication of those decisions will be clear and intentional.

Throughout this pandemic everyone has suffered in many ways. In some cases, folks have experienced tremendous loss. Our department recognizes this and will lead with understanding and empathy. The social, emotional, and academic toll is real and significant. To meet the needs of our students and staff, we will need to think differently from the past. Innovation, restructuring, modernization, and other approaches to creating a "new normal" in our system will be required. The department will support schools and districts in an effort to create opportunities for sharing best practices,

through collaborative projects and initiatives, to support all students. Timely interventions will be necessary, but for long-term and lasting improvement, systems changes will be required. And again, the department is ready to support and lead these efforts.

Improving opportunities and outcomes for children in our lowest performing schools is a priority. Kudos to Governor Carney and his team for the work they have been doing to establish a Learning Collaborative among the elementary and middle schools in Wilmington. Through a community-based governing board, targeted support will be provided to the participating elementary and middle schools in the city. At the heart of the plan is educator, student, family and community empowerment, operational flexibility, and cross-district collaboration. While struggling schools exist in all three of our counties, the greatest concentration of long-term underperformance is in our largest city. As a former superintendent of a district that served Wilmington, I know it is not due to a lack of interest, effort, or desire. It is a capacity, systems, and governance issue that can only be improved with a laser-like focus on those specific schools. My staff and I will provide all the support possible to enhance opportunities and outcomes for the children who attend those schools.

Early childhood education (prenatal through 5 years old) is another critically important topic. With the prospect of Build Back Better and federal support for improvements in early childhood services, we must be prepared to utilize resources, plan effectively, improve services, and support our staff and providers. Investing in early childhood helps to proactively, not reactively, address many educational and societal challenges we struggle with as a state. By wisely and effectively investing early, we save in the later years. I look forward to working with many different groups of people, agencies, organizations, and departments to plan and implement

practices and policies that improve opportunities and outcomes for our youngest learners.

Needless to say, there are many other critically important topics and issues that need to be addressed. Goals such as diversifying our educational workforce, recruiting and retaining strong educators and leaders, and increasing inclusive practices come to mind. As does revising an outdated funding system, improving our third-grade reading and eighth-grade math performance, and increasing the number of kids involved in co-curricular and extracurricular activities. The department and I will address those topics in future articles. Each of these requires not only our attention but also collaboration and a willingness to approach everything we do with the interest of all children in mind. We all agree that one of the pillars of a strong and healthy local community is its public school system. A strong Delaware requires a strong and healthy public school system.